"You can do nothing with these people," he said. "Perhaps, sometime later. . . . What can we do but go home?"

The other driver nodded approval. The girls, in tears, pleaded, "Take us with you. If we stay here, the muzhiks will kill us." We decided to leave as soon as the horses were ready.

Someone knocked lightly on the door. The factory teacher opened it halfway and stopped as if petrified by fear. The village teacher whispered to me, "That is Gerassim, the headman's brother, chief of the Black Hundred in the village. He was not at the meeting."

The man in the doorway was tall and seemed huge in his long, fur-lined coat. His face was dark, with sharp, shrewd eyes, bushy eyebrows, and a broad black beard. He held his fur hat in both hands and asked meekly, "Would you let me come in, Miss Teacher?"

"Of course, of course," the girl murmured. "Step in."

Gerassim bowed to all of us. After a brief silence, he said to the factory teacher, "Too bad I could not come to your meeting. It is a disgrace, I should say. The muzhiks are rough people, without education. One must have patience with them." Again he bowed deeply to all of us. Both girl teachers were beaming.

"That is all right, Gerassim," said the factory teacher. "We are happy that you see the things this way. . . . Will you stay with us for a cup of tea?"

Gerassim sat down on the edge of the bench, holding the cup in his hands. When Lazar and the other driver put on their sheepskin coats, he asked them casually, "Are you going back tonight?"

"Yes," Lazar answered. "No time to waste. We are going to cut trees and distribute firewood in Chorino tomorrow."

"This is the proper time to cut trees," Gerassim agreed. "Did you come by the upper road? Each year we have the same trouble on that stretch. The wind blows the snow away on the hill. A hell of a road for horses."

"Is the lower road better?" Lazar asked.

"You will see the difference," Gerassim replied. He drank another cup of tea, thanked us once more, and left the room rather hastily.

The road Gerassim recommended was as bad as that on the crest of the hill. We had to follow the empty sleighs on foot. When we passed a barn at the far end of the village, a voice barked from the darkness, "Stop, you others!"

Men rushed toward us from both sides of the barn and from the woods across the road. We were attacked from right and left but there was nobody between us and the sleighs.